

It was a week before the killings at Stag Hall, and the world had been erased.

Edges had disappeared, and the true shape of things had been lost under a fall of heavy winter snow. Now, all was light and shadow. The fields were blank pages, and stark trees held the weight of a cold blossom. The pale hills had dissolved into the sky, which fell to the horizon like a soaked sheet. The landscape was a ghost of itself.

Fisher knew much about this transitory, irredeemable world. But on this morning, in the east of Scotland, at least, its bloody face had been wiped clean, and all was white and unsullied. The snow had fallen and taken sound with it. Even the sea, down there, barely trembling in the harbour, seemed to be asleep. Fisher – just awake, tousle-haired – looked through the caravan window, saw the snow and remembered how as a child he had built a rough igloo in the grounds of the children’s home and crawled inside, revelling in the strange glow of the snow light. Light that was not light. The memory appeared, like breath in frosty air, and then faded.

He turned from the window. Encased in its frozen new clothing, the caravan clung to the hillside above St James. Nothing moved in the little fishing village in the East Neuk of Fife. Above, the sky was the colour of a deep bruise.

For the first time since his deployment, Fisher had managed to sleep. A deep, dreamless sleep. A green man, under a sea of white. Now he was awake, and he made breakfast. The gas flame shuddered into a crown of blue life. Later, spooning porridge and honey into his mouth, he gazed down to the sea.

He could see the harbour, the high wall, the bristles of unused lobster creels poking through the drifts. The empty quayside was ringed with snow-capped orange buoys. The boats were out. Lights glimmered in the snaking rows of cottages, in the café,

in the village pub, in the single store which stood at the foot of the steep, slippery, cobbled descent to the harbour. Ledges and roofs, submerged. The paths between, disappeared. The main road, gone.

Fisher looked closer. A solitary old man stood on the sea wall, like a nail on a fence. A gull dived past him.

Somewhere out on that misty horizon was the north coast of East Lothian, the grey lump of the Bass Rock and, further along the coast, the capital city, Edinburgh. The city would be deep in snow too, Fisher thought. The roads impassable, the spires and towers and hills an absurd dream.

He knew he needed to scout again. To find the secret way to the hall. He could not approach it from the road or through its high gates. But a stream ran in a steep culvert through St James, ending in an estuary west of the harbour. The path upstream led to a gradually deepening valley, which yard by hard yard delved deep into the kingdom's hills. That was where he needed to go.

Fisher left the caravan. He locked it behind him and tucked a service-issued knife into his back pocket. His boots sank with a clean, squeaking crunch into the fresh snow as he left the campsite.

Through the sleeping village, his breath in clouds about him, Fisher crept. The gabled roofs were uneven, mismatched, the guttering toothed with icicles. The air was sharp with frost and the salt of the sea.

He pulled up the deep hood of his waterproofs. The squat village church and its crooked graveyard loomed black. He walked on and watched and listened. He measured distance and time and the details of the village – its layout, its backroads, its lanes and dead ends. As he walked, he heard children's voices, raised like bells against the hush of the muffled land. Somewhere in the village, an old, cruel man slept, oblivious. That was all to come. He moved on.

Rain began to fall in light sheets. The huge sky shifted, and the sun suddenly broke through. His boots were clogged with

chunks of snow by the time he reached the river path. It was higher land here, and he looked back at St James and the caravan site at its edge, perched on the low cliffs. He could see three tubby fishing boats returning to harbour and, further out, an oil platform like a fossil spider, spiked and black in the deeper waters.

He walked now on older paths. The Kingdom of Fife is ancient. The stream here had spent immemorial time cutting through rock to find its course. It ran down hard and clear, whitening with grinning teeth over boulders and pooling wide and deep where the valley evened. The snow was sparser in the woods – caught in gnarled branches, melted by the river, hanging in surreal globs from fern stands.

Fisher tramped on. He reached the falls. The trees here were tall, leaning inwards, draping their snow-lined branches over the rumble of the water as it fell five metres down over a rock face into a deep pool. The stone was weathered and smooth, shaped like an amphitheatre, its seats empty. He wondered if it had been mined or quarried in years past – it seemed too theatrical for it to be natural.

Crouching, he swung a bag from his shoulder and took out a flask, a bar of chocolate. He stopped for a while. Snow was hard going. He knew that well from the Brecon Beacons. From the Carpathians.

He found a slippery path up the side of the tumbling falls. With cold hands he grabbed and pulled himself up with a curl of iron root, then walked on, up the densely wooded valley, beneath the close-set conspiracy of trunks.

Up along the ridge, he could suddenly see the horizon he sought: a line of fencing that skimmed the border of the valley. He cut up to the fencing, which looked freshly cut, recently wired. He edged along its length. He could hear the river murmuring below.

He walked another mile until there, off to one side, deep in a bare fold of land, he saw the sharp burst of electric lights. This

was the place. He knew it was not on any map: it was a new build on an old plot. A road to it had been laid, boundaries built, gates erected. He crouched in the trees.

Built in dark stone and slate, the building was elegant, modern, with high walls, arched windows and a vast lawn. There was a four-storey central chamber, with a pitched roof. Several outbuildings stretched along a paved drive, flanked by lines of saplings.

He moved closer and brought out his binoculars, which he rested on a fence post. In the outbuildings, there was machinery. A garage housed several large black cars. Smoke drifted up from the chimney of a kitchen block. Through the glasses twitching in his hand, he saw, strewn around the courtyard, shrink-wrapped containers and piles of boxed supplies under weighted blue tarpaulins. The house itself was dark, apart from one window glittering with artificial light. A figure moved behind it.

This was Stag Hall. Here the dragon gathered its strength and flexed its cold metal scales. Here, the old warrior would come for his final battle.